

OLDER AND WISER: Seniors isolation causes communities to suffer

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Older and
WISER
Margaret Coates



Are you not getting out much, missing old friends, feeling out of touch with people, doing less volunteering, involving yourself less in the community, moving your body less, and feeling less useful, especially if you have just ended your work life?

You may be experiencing social isolation.

According to the Canadian National Seniors Council Report on social isolation published in 2014, “Social isolation is commonly defined as a low quantity and quality of contact with others. A situation of social isolation involves few social contacts and few social roles, as well as the absence of mutually rewarding relationships.”

The report also notes social isolation is increasing as a result of an aging population. Other risk factors include a desire to “age in place,” being over 80, living alone, having compromised health status, disabilities, lacking access to transportation, low income, being marginalized and changing family structures.

Unfortunately, the impact of social isolation on seniors is immense.

In a Review of Social Isolation by Nicholas R. Nicholson published in the Journal of Primary Prevention it is observed how, “social isolation has been demonstrated to lead to numerous detrimental health effects in older adults, including increased risk for all-cause mortality, dementia, increased risk for re-hospitalization and an increased number of falls.

Seniors who are socially isolated can also experience addictive behaviours, being sedentary and not eating well. They also may stop contributing to their community through volunteering and participating in activities and events.

When a senior stops being connected to community, the community suffers.

According to the National Seniors Council Report, “the social isolation of seniors can cause communities to suffer a lack of social cohesion, higher social costs, and the loss of an unquantifiable wealth of experience that older adults bring to our

families, neighbourhoods and communities.”

A recent North Shore Services to Seniors Coalition meeting (sponsored by Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society), considered social isolation. Family Services of the North Shore outlined a partnership project funded by the federal government that will take action to reduce social isolation among seniors. Family Services, which is partnering with four other organizations across Metro Vancouver, will develop a curriculum and organize training events and a major conference to support volunteers and service providers.

One of the project partners, the Burnaby Community Services Society, will address the transportation needs of socially isolated seniors.

On the North Shore, Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre will contribute to this project piece.

“Transportation is individual, complex, and resource-intensive. But it's incredibly important because it connects seniors to all the programs, people, and places that keep them well and involved in community,” says Silver Harbour executive director Annwen Loverin.

You might have a friend or loved one who seems to be becoming socially isolated. So how can you help? You can phone them as often as you can, visit them regularly, go for walks with them, take them on outings, ask them over for lunch or dinner, suggest activities to participate in at a seniors centre and perhaps join with them, and get them involved with your family.

If you think you are experiencing social isolation try these strategies. Get out in the world: make appointments, go to a seniors centre, check out free events or go to the park. Volunteer your time. People will appreciate your efforts and you'll feel good about yourself. Take on the care of a pet or visit a shelter to walk dogs. Learn a new skill. Move your body by going to seniors exercise programs. Eat healthily and get plenty of sleep.

When the community and seniors themselves tackle social isolation we all benefit.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 47 years and has worked with and for seniors for 20 of those. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Email: lions_view@telus.net (mailto:lions_view@telus.net). Info: lionsviewseniorsplanning.com (<mailto:lionsviewseniorsplanning.com>).

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